‘Animal Island’ Fights to Survive : Philippines: A wildlife sanctuary is under attack by squatters who lay claim to the land. The dispute is a strange legacy of ex-President Ferdinand Marcos.

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CALAUIT ISLAND, Philippines —
Here in the western Pacific, on a remote, reef-fringed isle in the South China Sea, is a scene out of Africa.

Giraffes nibble the tops of tamarind trees. Herds of zebra gallop across a grassy savannah. Two male impala crash their sharp horns in battle. Gazelles graze near scores of topi, waterbuck and eland, all antelope-like animals imported from a continent away.

Calauit is one of the late President Ferdinand E. Marcos’ strangest legacies, a 14-square-mile wildlife sanctuary that has successfully bred and protected hundreds of exotic African animals, as well as endangered Philippine animals, for more than a decade. It is the nation’s only major conservation effort.

But today, the sanctuary is under attack. About 440 illegal settlers have moved to the island since 1986. They have shot two topi, speared rare deer, burned 120 hectares of forest to plant rice and dynamited a pristine reef. At least two giraffes are missing and presumed eaten.

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“They began hunting the animals,” complained Johnny Gapuz Jr., assistant project manager. “They began slashing and burning the forest. They began depleting the reef. . . . They are knowingly destroying the project.”

But the squatters, in turn, charge human rights abuses. Most are poor farmers and fishermen who were forced off Calauit when the African animals first arrived. They have returned, they say, because local officials stole money they were promised, and because the soil was poor in the resettlement areas.

“Many people died because there was no rice,” said Rafaela Tradio, 52, while a giraffe wandered under coconut palms on the nearby beach. “And this is my land. My grandmother and grandfather lived here. I was born here.”

Conservationists say Calauit has been a rare success in a nation where none of 60 national parks now meet international standards. Across the country, uncontrolled logging, mining and farming have denuded vast areas of forests, while fishermen have destroyed an estimated 70% of the reefs.

Government agencies mostly work to “foster exploitation, not management or conservation,” said Chip Fay, who represents the Washington-based Environmental Policy Institute in Manila. But he is troubled by a case that pits human rights against animals and the environment.

“It’s very hard for a poor country with high population density to move people around and implement effective conservation,” agreed Cristi Nozawa, spokeswoman for the Haribon Foundation, the nation’s largest environmental group. “The challenge for Calauit now is to integrate the people into the management plan.”

Marcos launched Calauit when he and his wife, Imelda, visited Kenya and were persuaded to help save African animals. In March, 1977, a ship bearing 104 animals arrived at his ersatz Africa 185 miles southwest of Manila. The herds have increased fivefold since then. Only the gazelles did not thrive.

Marcos’ support had its drawbacks. The island became known as “Bongbong’s Safari Park” after Marcos’ son, known as Bongbong, flew in twice by helicopter to hunt native wild boar. For many, the sanctuary became a symbol of Marcos’ profligate dictatorship.

But Calauit officials expanded the project in the early 1980s to breed 10 endangered indigenous species, including the mouse deer, the world's smallest hoofed animal, plus Calamian deer, bear cats, Palawan peacock pheasants, Hawksbill sea turtles and Philippine crocodiles.

All have proliferated on a lovely, lush island of grassy plains, thick mangrove swamps and wild bamboo forests growing on gentle hills. Python snakes grow to 21 feet in length, and the reef has what assistant project manager Gapuz claims is the world's largest clam, a monster that measures nearly three feet across.

Even those who support the project don't necessarily defend it. None of the eight African species were endangered. Biologists shudder at the mass transfer of so many species into an alien land. And with a yearly budget of $200,000, Calauit is the most expensive of any park or sanctuary in the country.

"The point is it's already there, it's already thriving," said Wilbur G. Dee, chief of the government's wildlife division. He said the goal now is to breed endangered species and sell extra animals to zoos and game parks. "The government can sell the animals and generate income," he said.

But the settlers have changed all that, said Francisco Y. Panol, head of the nonprofit Conservation and Resources Management Foundation that runs Calauit for the government. Most resources are now spent protecting the animals.

"There is heavy poaching," Panol said. Moreover, settlers have imported pigs and caribou infested with parasites, and at least 18 giraffes have been injured by sharp bamboo fences that settlers erected around their gardens.

When the project began, the government moved 256 families from Calauit to resettlement sites on two nearby islands. Each family was to be paid for their land, given four hectares and provided building materials, seed and goats. But 89 families have now returned, saying the promises were not kept.

"Life is better here," said Rodrigo Sabrosa, 45, who said he was paid only $45 to leave Calauit.

"We came back for our land," added Modesto Manleten, 50, who now farms six hectares and harvests octopus, crab and fish from the reef. "We'll stay here."

Although Panol's foundation won a lawsuit last year to force the settlers out, the court did not issue an eviction order. In the meantime, several settlers have charged Gapuz and local military officials with burning their huts and beating one man who was burning the forest.

Gapuz says he was simply protecting the island. Similarly, he recently tangled with a provincial official whom he found illegally logging. "He wanted to build a large disco using our mangroves," Gapuz said. "It was the fourth time I caught him. So I confiscated everything and turned him in."

For now, there is an uneasy truce. Armed wardens search for hunters, and fishing has been banned, if not stopped, within five miles of the island. More importantly, the endangered peacock pheasants recently produced three chicks, the first successful breeding in captivity.

"That's why we're here," Gapuz said with a grin.